

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF WORSHIP AND CULTURE

Introduction

Like an Alexandrite stone, worship changes its colour and depth with the source and quality of light cast upon it. It assimilates many energies, ideas and practices from its own times and from a more distant past; and if these are explored in the right way and seen in the proper perspective, they qualify and sharpen our varying responses. One such perspective is consideration of the conventional understanding of worship and its functions in the light of the life of great men of prayer. This is what I have attempted to do in the first section. I have chosen for discussion in this section Gandhiji as the main source, not just because he has to his credit massive writings on the subject,¹ but more because all that he has said on worship is based not on any theological system but on his own experience as a man of prayer *par excellence* and on the experiments he conducted on common worship among men of different faiths.

The discussion on the functions of worship brings out what worship is in its essence. This, in turn, leads to ask and examine whether we need formal worship at all, and it is found that though it is possible to answer that it is not necessary in this or that form, yet it is necessary for the vast majority of men in some form or other.

1. Most of what Gandhiji has written on worship on various occasions has been compiled into an anthology of 220 pages by Chandrakant Kaji, *Prayer*, (Navajivan publishing house, Ahmedabad, 1977). Another anthology which contains a lot of relevant material is compiled by P.K. Prabhu, *Truth is God* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1955). For easy reference, I have indicated against the original references the page numbers of these anthologies also.

In the third section we proceed to examine how worship, in its outward form is closely related to the culture of the people both for adoption of the symbols needed for its external practice as well as for the symbols to play their role properly in worship. The next section of this article illustrates what has been formulated in the third section, with reference to Christianity and the last section is devoted to some concluding remarks.

I

FUNCTIONS OF WORSHIP

i. *The Concept and Kind:* Worship, as conventionally understood, is the active phase of religion as made manifest in rite and cult,² which involves the service, reverence and honour paid to God, the gods, saints, holy relics etc., by means of devotional words, acts, music and so on.³ Again, according to the conventional understanding of it, worship may be considered to be of two kinds: 1. private prayer and, 2. corporate devotion. The former is performed unseen by men or seen by only a few; the second is official worship rendered by men assembled for a religious purpose and forming a religious society.⁴ In contrast to private prayer, corporate devotion is a social experience, involving a community of believers; it takes place at a distinct time and place and employs a certain set of rituals in a definite form. Gandhiji also attests to the justification of this kind of division: "Man is both an individual and a social being. As an individual he may have his prayer all the waking hours, but as a member of society he has to join in congregational prayer."⁵ He further says, "No one should fight shy of collective prayer. Man is a social being. If men and women can eat together, play together and work together, why should they not pray together?"⁶

2. H.B. Alexander, "Worship" (Primitive), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XII, ed. James Hastings, (Edinburgh: T&T Clerk, 1934), p. 753.
3. E. Royston Pike, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951), p. 398.
4. F. Cabrol, "Worship", *The Catholic Encyclopedia* ed. Charles G. Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), p. 71b.
5. M.K. Gandhi, *Young India* (8-9-1927), p. 295; (C. Kaji, p. 101).
6. M.K. Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, (1957), p. 61; (C. Kaji, p. 104).

ii. *Purificatory Function:* According to traditional acceptance, worship is offered for four ends: "First, to give supreme honour and glory to God; secondly, to thank Him for all His benefits; thirdly, to obtain pardon for our sins; and fourthly, to obtain all other graces and blessings."⁷ Reflection will show that God is not in need of our praise or honour or thanksgiving. Nevertheless, we are expected to offer all these because we are thereby enabled to understand our dependency on Him and rid ourselves of self-conceit. That is why Gandhiji says, "The object of prayer is not to please God who does not want our prayers or praise but to purify ourselves."⁸ Again, "Prayer does, for the purification of the mind, what the bucket and the broom do for the cleaning up of physical surroundings. No matter whether the prayer we recite is the Hindu prayer or the Muslim or the Parsi, its function is essentially the same, namely, purification of the heart."⁹ Neither is Prayer an asking because He knows what we need. He knows to feed even the birds of the air and to clothe the grass of the fields (Mt. 6, 30-32). He "needs no reminder. He is within everyone. Nothing happens without His permission. Our prayer is a heart search. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are helpless without his support...Prayer is a call to humility. It is a call to self-purification, to inward search."¹⁰ "Even when it is petitional, the petition should be for the cleansing and purification of the soul, for freeing it from the layers of ignorance and darkness that envelope it."¹¹

Corporate Worship also performs a purificatory function in individuals inasmuch as it inspires each of the participants to be more and more pure. "I believe" says Gandhiji, "that one imbibes pure thoughts in the company of the pure. Even if there is only one pure man, the rest would be affected by that one man's purity, the condition is that we attended the prayers with that intention; otherwise our coming to the prayers is meaningless. I go further and maintain that even if we all had our weakness but come to the (prayer) meeting with the intention of removing them,

7. *Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1965), p. 68.
8. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (26.5.1946), p. 156; (C. Kaji, p. 31).
9. M.K. Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, (1957), p. 80; (C. Kaji, p. 32).
10. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (8.6.1935) (P.K. Prabhu p. 42).
11. M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, (23-1-1930); (P.K. Prabhu, p. 40).

our collective effort made from day-to-day would quicken the progress of reform. For even as co-operation in the economic or political field is necessary, so is co-operation much more necessary in the moral plane."¹²

Thus, according to Gandhiji, the prime function of worship, both private and corporate, is self-purification of the worshippers. George Galloway is also in agreement with this view, when he understands that "in spiritual ethical religion, prayer has ceased to be a wonder-working spell or an efficacious ceremonial form; nor is it, as in the religions of nature, the expression of a mere desire for material goods. Prayer is rather converse of the human spirit with the divine, a communion in which the individual yields himself to God and seeks wisdom to know what is best, and strength to do what is right."¹³

iii. *Unificatory Function*: Man is not an isolated individual. He is born and bred only in and through society. So his bounden duty is to serve fellow-human beings. It is prayer again which gives him strength to fulfil his duty towards others and thereby establish unity among themselves. "We are born to serve our fellow-men, and we cannot properly do so unless we are wide-awake. There is an eternal struggle raging in man's breast between the powers of darkness and of light, and he who has not the sheet-anchor of prayer to rely upon will be a victim to the powers of darkness."¹⁴ "You, whose mission in life is service of fellow-men, will go to pieces if you do not impose on yourselves some sort of discipline and prayer is a necessary spiritual discipline."¹⁵

There are moments when we fall away from our high ideal of serving our fellow-beings. It is prayer again that comes to our rescue. It is during the moments of one's devotional acts that "one reviews one's immediate past, confesses one's weakness, asks for forgiveness and strength to be and do better."¹⁶ The same view is reflected by Professor Hackman also, when he states, "In worship and prayer man... experiences the benefit of inward clean-

12. M.K. Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, (1957), p. 63-64; (C. Kaji, 103-104).

13. George Galloway, *The Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), p. 171.

14. M.K. Gandhi, *Young India* (23-1-1930); (P.K. Prabhu, p. 41).

15. M.K. Gandhi *Young India* (23-1-1930); (P.K. Prabhu, p. 42).

16. M.K. Gandhi, *Young India* (10-6-1926); (P.K. Prabhu, p. 18).

ing and forgiveness as he comes in touch with a regenerative power that can transform the past and redirect and order his life. In this atmosphere man finds it easier to straighten out tangled human relationships and to forgive his fellow-men."¹⁷ Hence it is that Gandhiji rightly calls prayer "the greatest binding force making for the solidarity and oneness of the human family."¹⁸

Corporate worship is a much more visible expression of this unificatory function. For, "as men and women of all walks of life and varying degrees of maturity, the rich and poor, the important members of the community and the lowly, the learned and ignorant, unite in corporate worship, a levelling of differences takes place; the old may feel young in the presence of youth, and the young mature in fellowship with their elders. At least during the hour of worship and prayer, one senses the reality of the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God."¹⁹ That is why Gandhiji also says "Congregational prayer is a means for establishing the essential human unity through common worship. Mass singing of Ramadun and the beating of *tal* are its outward expressions. If they are not a mechanical performance but are an echo of the inner unison as they should be, they generate a power and an atmosphere of sweetness and fragrance, which has only to be seen to be realized."²⁰

The essential function of worship, therefore, is to enable man to live with himself, i.e. in purity of soul, and to live with others, i.e. in unity with all. Man is at once an individual and a social being. As an individual, he has within himself various tendencies, feelings, motives, and thoughts which are often in conflict among themselves. Again, as a member of society he has to deal with many others, who stand contrary to or in conflict with his own ideas, ideals, ambitions, tendencies etc. How best a relation he is going to establish within himself and with others is the fundamental challenge that is posed to him by his very existence. It is worship that prepares him to meet this challenge in a successful way. It is prayer that gives him an opportunity to make a search how far he has succeeded, and why he has not,

17. George G. Hackman and others, *Religion in Modern Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 272.

18. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (3-3-1946), p. 29; (C. Kaji, p. 19).

19. George G. Hackman, *op.cit.*, p. 278.

20. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (3-3-1946), p. 25-26; (C. Kaji, p. 101).

and so on. It is this search,—the search for living with oneself and with others—that constitutes the essence of prayer and worship.

If one has a sincere recourse to worship, then, he will succeed in dealing with himself and with others. The result of worship, then, is peace, peace within himself, and peace with others. This is what Gandhiji attests to: "The man of prayer will be at peace with himself and with the whole world; the man who goes about the affairs of the world without a prayerful heart will be miserable and will make the world also miserable."²¹ That this is really so is evident from the lives of all the saints in all religions. I should like to cite again the personal testimony of Gandhiji himself: "Prayer has been the saving of my life. Without it I should have been a lunatic long ago. My *Autobiography* will tell you that I have had my fair share of the bitterest public and private experiences. They threw me into temporary despair, but if I was able to get rid of it, it was because of prayer... In spite of despair staring me in the face on the political horizon, I have never lost my peace. In fact I have found people who envy my peace. That peace, I tell you comes from prayer. I am not a man of learning but I humbly claim to be a man of prayer... well, I have given my practical testimony. Let every one try and find that, as a result of daily prayer, he adds something new to his life, something with which nothing can be compared."²²

II

NEED FOR FORMAL WORSHIP

The reference I have made to the result of worship brings us to an important stage in this discussion. It initiates two pertinent questions which I would like to consider in this section.

i. There are some people for whom worship is just a formal act; prayer is a mere exercise of words or of the ears; a mere repetition of a formula. Will these people also necessarily find the peace in themselves and with others as Gandhiji did?

21. M.K. Gandhi. *Young India*, (23-1-1930): (P.K. Prabhu, p. 42).

22. M.K. Gandhi. *Young India*, (24-9-1931): p. 274. (C. Kaji, pp. 27, 28)

Not necessarily so; the object of prayer is to purify ourselves. True. But, "the process of self-purification consists in a conscious realization of His presence within us. There is no strength greater than that which such a realization gives. The Presence of God has to be felt in every walk of life. If you think that as soon as you leave the prayer-ground you can leave and behave anyhow, your attendance at the prayer is useless."²³ "Telling one's beads... going to the Mosque or the Temple... saying the *namaz* or the *gayatri*, these things are all right as far as they go. It is necessary to do the one or the other according to one's religion but by themselves they are no indication of one's being devoted to God in worship. He alone adores God who finds his happiness in the happiness of others, speaks evil of none, does not waste his time in the pursuit of riches, does nothing immoral, who acquits himself with others as with a friend, does not fear the plague or any human beings."²⁴

Hence it is clear that those people for whom worship is just a formal act, should not stop with mere formal worship, but should rather connect it with life. It is precisely because of this that in all the higher and ethical religions "while worship is regarded as essential, it is not reckoned of value by itself but is brought into close relation with the conduct of life. Worship in the temple or church becomes a part of a wider service continued in the world."²⁵

ii. On the contrary there may be some others in whose life all formality of worship is removed and their very life turns out to be an act of worship, every breath of theirs becomes an act of self-dedication to the service of others. For them labour becomes prayer and their life becomes one continuous act of worship. In such cases the question that arises here is, "Would it not be better for men of this sort to give the time they spend on the worship of God to the service of the poor? Should not true service make formal worship unnecessary for such men?"

Gandhiji's answer is again a "no". "The biggest of *karma-yogis* never gives up devotional song or worship. *Idealistically*

23. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (26-5-1946) p. 156. (C. Kaji, p. 31).

24. M.K. Gandhi, *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XI, (1961) p. 126. (C. Kaji, p. 18). *Namaz* is Islamic Prayer. *Gayatri* is a Rigvedic hymn to the Sun God.

25. George Galloway, *op.cit* p. 169.

it may be said that true service of others is itself worship and that such devotees do not need to spend any time in songs etc. *As a matter of fact bhajanas* etc. are a help to true service and keep the remembrance of God fresh in the heart of the devotees."²⁶ If such is the case with Gandhi then it becomes all the more necessary for ordinary men, who are not so exalted as to be able to say that all our acts are a dedication. It is a matter of experience that we are all erring mortals, who find inward communion difficult even for a single moment, and to remain perpetually in communion with the divine impossible. We are, therefore, bound to set apart certain hours when we can make a serious effort to throw off the attachments of the world for a while, and also make a serious endeavour to remain, so to say, out of the flesh. It is in this connection that Gandhiji makes the following exhortation; "Let us not make the astounding claim that our whole life is a prayer, and therefore we need not sit down at a particular hour to pray. Even men who were all their time in tune with the Infinite did not make such a claim. Their lives were a continuous prayer, and yet for our sake, let us say, they offered prayer at set hours, and renewed each day the oath of loyalty to God. God of course never insists on the oath but we must renew our pledge every day and I assure you we shall then be free from every imaginable misery in life."²⁷

In short, therefore, though it is *possible* that some people may be able to convert every minute of their life into an act of self-dedication without recourse to a formal worship of one particular sort, yet *in practice*, and in the vast majority of cases, formal worship of some sort or other is a vital necessity. That is precisely the reason why all religions, while refusing to separate worship from conduct of life, and even when they find the truth in the idea that a man reverences God by doing duty and that doing of the divine will is true worship, they nevertheless, do not resolve worship into the performance of duty.²⁸ They always advocate some special form of worship and set apart times for formal devotions and even prescribe them as obligatory. What particular form or structure worship takes in any one religion depends largely upon the culture in which it is born, bred and developed. We shall discuss this aspect in the following section.

26. M.K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, (13-10-1946) p. 357; (G. Kaji, p. 78). Italics mine.

27. M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, (24-9-1931) p. 274; (C. Kaji, p. 29)

28. George Galloway, *op.cit.*, p. 170

III

WORSHIP AND CULTURE

i. *Religion and day to day life*

That worship is related to culture can be demonstrated in many ways. One such way is recalling how close religion is linked with the rest of life. "Religion", says Prof. H.D. Lewis, does not take its course in a void or a world of its own. On the contrary... religion is parasitic on other activities and comes to life as a formative influence within other experiences. This is what gives it body and content. But in that case, much in its course will be determined by interests and conditions which are not in themselves expressly religious."²⁹ If we accept this view regarding the relation of religion with the rest of life, then we can validly infer that worship, which forms the 'active phase of religion', is related to culture, because the word culture is nothing but a general term which constitutes all those 'other activities', 'other experiences', and 'the interests and conditions which are not in themselves expressly religious'.

Again, the relation may be understood with respect to the nature of corporate worship too. For, corporate worship is, by its nature, an expression of the community of worshippers. So naturally, the outward form of it should be such that it evokes a sense of belonging and strikes a chord in the hearts of the people who join the worship at that time and in that place. In other words, the outward form and all that constitutes it should express the mind of the worshipping community, its regional traits, needs, preoccupations and sentiments, according to the times and seasons and occasions. That means, in short, the form of worship should reflect the culture of the worshipping community.

ii. *Role of Symbols in Worship*

The most effective way of understanding the relationship of worship with culture is to understand the role of symbols in worship. The outward form of worship after all, let us not forget, is constituted of elements which are, for the most part, symbolic. These symbols may be classified³⁰ into i) ritual acts that are

29. H.D. Lewis, *Our experience of God* (The Fontana Library of Theology Philosophy, 1970) p. 214.

30. Cf. H.D. Lewis, *op. cit.*, Chapter 10: Material Factors in Religion

performed in worship and ii) material entities that figure in them. The most obvious examples of the former are those that are performed in Christian sacraments or Hindu *samskaras*, including bodily postures like bowing the head clasping the hands kneeling etc. Some of the best known examples of the latter are those things that are used in specific ceremonies like the Christian sacraments and Hindu *samskaras* like water, oil, ashes, incense, vestments, including religious buildings like temples, churches etc.

Symbols of worship vary from religion to religion and region to region. They may be more prominent in some than in others. They may not have a clearly defined role to play in some religions. But it is rarely, if ever, that they are absent altogether. Even when a conscious attempt is made to dispense with ritual, as in cases of strong reaction against excessive or perverted ritualism, the reaction itself is apt to assume a ritualistic form appropriate to itself. Thus, for example, the Quakers in the West aspired to reduce the formal feature of corporate worship to a minimum. But, not only were they forced, by the requirements of public transaction, to have some formal procedure so as to indicate how matters should go, but their very union in an outwardly simple worship like the 'quite meditation' did show a subtle ritual character of its own.³¹

If such is the importance of symbols or the outward form of worship then what exactly is their role in worship? One may try to elucidate it by distinguishing three functions of symbols in worship.

a) *Communicative and Causal Function*: Any symbol is a means of communication. In fact every word is a symbol that communicates our thought to others. So also the symbols used in worship are designed not only to convey spiritual truths but also to cause spiritual dispositions. The high pinnacles of the church, its lofty vaults, the magnificence or the simplicity of the landscape, the quiet of the sanctuary, the dim light that filters through it, —all, in some fashion, not only communicate to us, but also cause in us something of sacredness, peace and grandeur, enabling us to cut ourselves off from outside thoughts.

b) *Completive Function*: A personal relation is always best maintained by expressing it fittingly. The lover 'tells' his love

31. Cf. H.D. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

and provides tokens of it not only to assuage doubts, but even the mere telling of it affords an enrichment of it; it is an extension of the lover's willingness to give himself to his beloved, a favour which has no purpose beyond the completion of the lovers' surrender.³² Now, in those religions where personal relation to God is paramount, it is pre-eminently true of that relation also to be expressed through symbols; because in finding ways to express our love we extend it and make our surrender to God complete. The sacrificial ritual is perhaps the most significant example of this completive function of symbols in worship. Much of the elaborate ornamentation in the sacrificial ritual in Christian worship, namely, the Holy Mass, has been mainly due to the enthusiasm with which it has been sought to complete the giving oneself to God, in the praise of Him and for the service of men.³³

c) *Perpetuative Function*: There is a "natural tendency in us to provide figurative representation in outward forms for various, but especially the impressive experiences and interest and to give some of those representations permanence and prominence by repeated or regular recourse to them."³⁴ In consonance with this natural tendency, much of the development in religious symbolism also has taken place. In a unique religious experience of one particular individual at a particular time, some physical entity may have a place of prominence. Thus, for example, the Cross in the case of Christ or the Bo Tree in the case of Buddha. Such a physical entity serves as a definite help to his disciples to induce, enrich and enliven the total experience of the Master. Their religious insights will, in turn, be further extended and enriched by the religious insights of many others and thus there will develop a particular pattern of religious awareness. Now, in this process of maintaining or perpetuating the intense religious experience of the Master, and in extending it to the lives of many others, those material entities and the outward forms connected with them, including the contemplation and manipulation of them, will have acquired important symbolic roles, beside a recognized religious status. This is what may be called the perpetuative function of symbols.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

iii. *Cultural Adaptation of Symbols*

Now, for each of the functions of Symbols to be duly performed in worship, the symbols need to be part of the culture in which the worship is performed. First, for the communicative and causal function to be performed, the community in which a particular symbol is used must be aware of the connection between the symbol and its significance; otherwise there is bound to be only mis-communication and mis-interpretation. Thus, for instance, in the secular realm, the act of kissing would be—from the point of view of Western culture—a proper sign of communicating a man's sororial affection also. But, from the point of view of the Eastern culture like that of India, the same act would be considered as communicative of only 'Love' but not sororial affection. So, if man wants to express, here, his sororial affection he may not succeed through the same symbol but only through a different symbol; his act of kissing will only be mis-interpreted. Likewise in worship also, there may be certain symbols which signify differently in different cultures; and if so, they need to be altered accordingly. Thus, for example, in Christian worship, formerly, a priest was required to wear shoes while celebrating the Mass. This was definitely right and just from the point of view of the Western culture. Because of the generally cold climate in Europe, wearing shoes was considered to constitute a sort of 'completeness' in dress. It was, therefore, fitting that a priest while entering the sanctuary to celebrate the Mass should wear shoes too. But in Indian culture it is considered laudable to go barefoot while entering a house or while standing before elders. Hence, a proper symbol for a priest here to show his sense of reverence would be to go barefoot while entering the Holy of Holies to celebrate the Mass. Thus arises the need to adopt certain symbols appropriate to that culture in which worship is offered. Otherwise the symbols cannot but fail to perform their communicative function.

When certain symbols have failed to be communicative in a particular form of worship, in a particular culture, then they cannot be expected to perform the complete function either. For, how could they enable the worshippers to 'complete' their religious disposition through certain symbols, whose significance is not even communicated to them? One may be inclined to say that the proper significance of the symbols should be explained to the worshipping community to enable the members to 'complete' their religious disposition; and so, it may be argued, even the foreign symbols

need not be changed according to the culture of the community. But, it must be noted that what matters in religion and particularly in worship, is not just the intellectual grasp of the symbols and their significance, but mainly the assimilation of the significance into one's own personality and specially into one's emotional attitude and life. It may not be out of place here to recall the famous contrast that Tagore brought out between the wooden pole, used as a telegraphic post, and the real tree; the former can be used for communication, all right, but it can no longer bring forth any fruit, as it has already been uprooted from its original soil and planted in a different soil and has no longer life in it; the real tree can, however, bring forth fruits in abundance because it is still rooted in the same soil and is alive.

Nor can the perpetuative function be really accomplished in worship if the symbols used in it are quite foreign to the culture of the worshipping community. In order that a particular religious experience may be maintained and perpetuated, fruitfully and fervently, it is absolutely necessary that the symbols in which the experience is couched should be such as to affect the life of the worshipping community. This can be explained by taking another example in Christian worship. The bread and wine of the sacrament of Holy Communion are symbols with a precise meaning, derived from the way in which Christ offered his own sacrifice. But this specific experience may be better preserved and perpetuated if only one goes by the spirit of the sacrament and not stick to the mere symbol of the sacrament. Bread and wine are all right in those cultures where they actually constitute the daily food of the people. But in a culture like that of India, where the bread and wine not only do not represent the ordinary, normal food of the people, but also where wine, as a drink is considered unholy, one cannot expect the same religious experience to be preserved with the same fervour and vigour. It would be interesting to quote here the prayers of an Indian towards the adoption of an Indian symbol for the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist: "Jesus, is the Sacramental rite meant only for those nations that are in the habit of taking bread and wine? Are the Hindus excluded from partaking of the Holy Eucharist? Wilt Thou cut us off because we are rice-eaters and teetotallers? That cannot be, Spirit of Jesus, that cannot be. Both unto Europe and Asia Thou hast said, eat my flesh and drink my blood. Therefore the Hindu shall eat Thy flesh in rice and drink Thy blood in pure water, so that the Scripture might be

fulfilled.”³⁵ The same mind reflects elsewhere: “When Christ said to His disciples, ‘this is my body’ ‘this is my blood’ he evidently referred to the particular piece of bread and the particular cup of wine he had in his hands... not any wine or bread we might buy today. What Christ himself actually touched and blessed and sanctified was immediately transformed into his own substance, into his flesh and blood... It justifies the use of bread or chappati or other articles of food used as the staff of life by different nations, provided they are sanctified and transformed by Divine touch... Whether it be bread or rice matters not if the substance has been changed and transformed into Christ’s Body”.³⁶ This line of thinking will support the view that by changing the symbols appropriate to the differences in culture, the religious experience involved in the sacrament will be perpetuated more meaningfully and more fruitfully, and not otherwise.

IV

CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND ITS RELATION WITH DIFFERENT CULTURES

i. *Christ’s worship and Jewish Culture*

“Love to God as Father and to all men as brothers in virtue of their relation to Him—this constitutes essential worship; to it all forms of specific worships are subordinate and have value only as expressive of this and all it implies according to Christ’s idea of God’s character” says Bartlet.³⁷ This is indeed true of Christ’s own life. He, though the Holy one of God (Mk. 1, 24), the eternal High Priest, seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 8, 1), yet had to be made like men in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, the Father, to make expiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2, 17). In fact He did dedicate

35. Keshub Chunder Sen, *The New Dispensation* (Calcutta: Bidhan Press, 1903) p. 1. I here place on record my gratefulness to Prof. K.J. Shah, Rev. Antony Chirappanath and Mr. J.M. Eadathottu for their valuable help to clarify my thought on the issues discussed here.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

37. J. Vernon Bartlet, “Worship” (Christian), ed., James Hastings, *op. cit.*, p. 763.

His whole life as an act of worship, fully open to the will of the Father, so much so that His “obedience was at its most intense at his death on the cross when he submitted himself to the grace of the judgment of God as representative of sinful man.”³⁸ And, his death was indeed a sacrificial offering for the sins of men (Heb. 10, 11) and a sure means of salvation (Lk. 22, 19) whose efficacy was revealed in his resurrection.

Thus according to Christ, Worship was mainly spiritual in as much as it was to consist in offering one’s whole life for the service of God and one’s fellow-men. That is why He defined the true worship as the one which is offered in spirit and truth (Jn. 4,24). But, for that matter, Christ did not abolish formal worship at all. In fact He subjected himself to all the rituals of Jewish worship; He received baptism from John (Mk. 1, 9); He subjected himself to fasting (Mt. 4,2). Along with his private prayers (Jn. 6,15; Lk. 11,1; Mk. 14,32), he also celebrated common worships and festivals that had been enjoined by the Jewish worship (Lk. 22, 7). He visited the Temple for the feasts (Lk. 2,41; Jn. 2,13; 10,22). He preached in the place where people gathered to worship (Jn. 18,20; Mk. 14,49). Needless to say that all this goes to prove that Christ himself was a product of the Jewish culture.

But it must also be recognized that Christ, while adhering to the Jewish form of worship, did substitute for it a new form which would, by degrees, replace the old one. At the Last Supper he initiates the sacrificial meal anticipating the unique sacrifice on the cross and fulfilling the promise of communicating eternal life to those who partake of his flesh and blood (Jn. 6,51) among his disciples, and commands them to renew it (Lk. 22, 19ff). What is characteristic of this new worship is that Christ adopted the very rite of the ancient Jewish culture, viz, that of the Paschal Sacrifice to be performed in the form of eating bread and wine but, of course, profoundly changing its meaning, by his act. Another ceremony which Christ himself gave to his disciples was Baptism. This again was nothing but the Jewish rite of ablution but assuming a new character in the Gospels, a baptism in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the distinctive nature of the New Worship was defined in relation to the Jewish culture

38. Michael Schmaus, “Worship”, ed., Karl Rahner, *Sacramentum Mundi* Vol. 6 (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975), p. 391.

of which it was born and at the same time imparting to it a profoundly modified significance.

ii. *Worship of the Apostolic Church and Jewish Culture*

Christ's spirit of taking an already existing rite in the culture and profoundly modifying its character is retained in all forms of worship in the church of the Apostolic Age. Thus, for instance, the synagogal usage to which the earliest converts were accustomed, was followed in the main, but with a distinctive feature, namely 'the Breaking of the Bread with the Thanksgiving' to God for the redemption in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Again borrowing from the Synagogue, it retained the Sacred Books as the most precious portion of its heritage, but they were at once made the liturgical books of the new rite. The Church also borrowed from the Jewish culture of the Diaspora the form of their meetings in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day; but it was substituted by the Holy Sunday with a positive religious significance for Christians. Again as in the synagogue, the singing of the psalms and the reading of the sacred books, followed by an exhortation or homily were also kept up by the early church. All these only show how worship of the very early Church had been emerging out of the Jewish culture of which it was born.

iii. *Worship of the early Church and other Cultures*

The changes which passed over Christian worship to the end of the 4th century, show a steady decrease in the Biblical or Hebraic spirit and a corresponding infusion of a non-Biblical or Hellenistic element of thought in the interpretation of the Eucharistic Worship. Thus, the sacred Bread and Wine were conceived as the Body and Blood of Christ's passion, though now existing in resurrected glory, and the Eucharistic Sacrifice is more and more conceived in a propitiatory sense and many prayers of intercession were incorporated and what was formerly a single prayer was broken up into specialized moments and phases, marking stages in the sacred drama of the Liturgy.³⁹

Such a development, especially in the way of coming to terms with the 'Pagan' culture, was not only with regard to the Eucharistic sacrifice, but also extended to other aspects of the worship. The various rites and customs the Church adopted or imitated or

39. J. Vernon Bartlet, *op. cit.*, p. 768.

borrowed from the cultures around, is a subject which has been treated at such length by Cardinal Newman in several chapters of his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*⁴⁰ that there is no need to repeat them here. But a few specimens of his illustrations are given here: "The use of temples...incense, lamps, and candles; votive offerings on recovery from illness; holy water; asylums; holy days and seasons, use of calendars; processions, blessings on the fields; sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure, the ring in marriage, turning to the East, images at a later date, perhaps the ecclesiastical chant, and the Kyrie Eleison—all these are of pagan origin, and sanctified by their adoption into the Church."⁴¹

Again, explaining how Christian festivals were introduced in place of the Heathen one's Cardinal Newman gives an extract from Theodoret of the 5th century. "For the Pandian festival, the Diasia...we have the feasts of Peter, of Paul, of Thomas...and of other Martyrs; and for that old-world procession, and indecency of work and word, are held modest festivities, without intemperance or revel, or laughter, but with divine hymns, and attendance on holy discourses and prayers, adorned with laudable tears."⁴²

It may be of interest, in this connection, to note that even Christmas and Easter, the greatest festivals of Christians, observed in commemoration of Christ's birth and resurrection respectively were adopted from Pagan festivals. There seems to have been no interest in celebrating the birthday of Christ until the first half of the 3rd century. In those days the Christians of Egypt regarded 6th January as the day of the Nativity. Some others believed in, still very different dates. It was only later that the church fixed 25th December as the day of the festival for the universal Church. In ancient Rome, December, 25th was considered the day that marked the winter Solstice and was celebrated as the "Birthday of the unconquered Sun", since on that day the sun seems to stop his departing course—destroying thereby the darkness of the shortest day of the year—and to start on the return journey—bringing with him days of lengthening light and the hope of Spring. And it is this which was converted by the Church into the Christmas festival, imparting to it a new significance.

40. Cf. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans; Green & Co., 1914), Chapter VIII.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

Just as the day of Sun became the Lord's day (Sunday) so this festival of Sun was conquered by Christ and became the Holy Day for Christians. Likewise the Easter festival was also adapted from the pagan festival of Eostre, the goddess of spring, whose festival was held at the spring equinox. Just as the pagan festival marked the New Year and the fresh creation of the whole world of vegetation, the new festival was given a new significance viz., the new life in Christ and also in those who partake of his mysteries.⁴³

In this process of absorbing into her worship elements which belonged to the general culture, including even the religious elements in it, the early Church seems to have been influenced more by Roman culture than by any other. Many instances could be given to substantiate this. To cite a few, the litany is a very familiar stylistic form of liturgical prayer which goes back to the pre-Christian Roman custom.⁴⁴ The ceremonies at baptism, marriage and burial also contained many elements which were taken from Roman Culture.⁴⁵ This is what made the author of *The Story of Civilization* comment so emphatically in the following manner: "When Christianity conquered Rome the ecclesiastical structure of the pagan Church, the title and vestments of the pontifex maximus, the worship of the Great Mother and a multitude of comforting divinities, the sense of supersensible presences everywhere of the joy or solemnity of old festivals, and the pageantry of immemorial ceremony, passed like maternal blood into the new religion, and captive Rome captured her conqueror."⁴⁶

iv. *The Christian Worship in the Middle Ages*

Roman culture began to exert such a dominant force on the Church as a whole and on its worship in particular, that its dynamic process of cultural adaptation became stagnant and static throughout the Middle Ages and all that was Roman was considered Christian; and all that was Christian was considered Roman.

43. For more details, please Cf. Vergilius Ferm, ed. *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (London: Peter Owen Ltd.), pp. 164, 165 and 239. Cf. also E. Royston Pike ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951), pp. 100, 132.

44. J.A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy* (London: 1963) p. 127.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-141.

46. Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944) p. 671-672.

The Roman language viz., Latin was accepted as the universal language of the Church and as the sacred language of the Church's Liturgy. In the vestments of the Holy Mass, in the postures of the priest during the celebration of the Holy Mass, etc., the Church's Liturgy became so Roman that the 'Rituale Romanum' began to prescribe even to the minutest details how the rituals in the worship are to be performed in a Roman way, so much so that the worship became more ritualistic than worship. Elucidating this point, Bartlet says "Cultus, rites and ceremonies, as much, so predominated over the inward element...that average medieval worship was psychologically legal rather than filial...Religion was statutory in nature and spirit, a being subject to ordinances in daily life and in church...Such cultus and such spiritually passive and unenlightened worship represented no normal advance, save in the education of aesthetic and emotional sensibility to the divine, as majestic and mysterious in its nature and ways, with which it affected certain souls... It was small wonder then... medieval piety was full of the spirit of bondage again into fear and sadly devoid of the spirit of adoption whereby we cry Abba Father..."⁴⁷ It is in this context that Will Durant's statement becomes pregnant with meaning: "When Christianity conquered Rome... the captive Rome captured her conqueror".

It is heartening, however, to find that there had been some attempts to revive the original attitude of the early Church towards the World Cultures, namely, adopting and assimilating the symbols and customs of different cultures including certain rites and ceremonies, which were wholly, religious, into christian worship, of course, after giving new significance to them. The most well-known of such attempts in the medieval period are those of Fr. Ricci in China, and Fr. De Nobili in India. Fr. De Nobili built his church in Indian style; pleaded for the retention by the Brahmin converts of the Brahminical thread, tilakam, tuft of hair, ceremonial baths etc. He even allowed them to wear sacred ashes on the forehead. He had also composed Mantras and Slokas to be recited during the performance of the various ceremonies, which he adopted from Hindu rites of marriage etc.⁴⁸

47. J. Vernon Bartlet, *op. cit.*, p. 772.

48. Ignatius Hirudayam, *Christianity and Tamil Culture* (Madras: University of Madras), p. 19 & 22.

Such attempts, however, were very few and occasional and could not last long. In fact, simultaneously, the Portuguese Missionaries were continuing to build their churches in the Western Baroque style of their times. They imposed their Portuguese surnames on the converts, Portuguese them in their manner of dressing, eating, and behaving and denounced Hinduism in to pointing out its real or imagined defects as proof for their denunciation, and inculcated in their neophytes a contempt for their old religion.⁴⁹ And the English missionaries imposed their imported customs and cultures on the converts, wrongly identifying them as religious customs, such as the shoe-wearing, cap-wearing, beef-eating, and so on.

The Indian population, particularly the elite of India, found all this so intolerable and repulsive that they had the courage to express their views in the open even during those days of political domination by a foreign power. To cite just one specimen of their expression: "England has sent unto us, after all a Western Christ. This is indeed to be regretted. Our countrymen find that in this Christ, sent by England, there is something that is not quite congenial to the native mind. It seems that the Christ that has come to us is an Englishman, with English manners and customs about him and with temper and spirit of an Englishman in him..."⁵⁰ To mention another example, this time from the Indian elite of very recent times, "If Europe interpreted Christianity in terms of her own culture, of Greek thought and Roman organization, there is no reason why the Indian Christian should not relate the message of salvation in Christ to the larger spiritual background of India. Possibly India's religious insight may help to revivify Christianity, not only in India but in the world at large."⁵¹

It is heartening to note that these aspirations of the Indian elite have not proved useless. In response to them, as it were, the Church today, rediscovering the attitude and approach of the ancient Church, has stated its stand in unambiguous terms. "Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather she respects and fosters the spiritual adorn-

49. *Ibid.*, pp. 19 & 20.

50. Kesub Chunder Sen. "India asks; who is Christ?" *Kesub Chunder Sen's Lectures in India* (London: Cassell and Company, 1901) p. 363-365.

51. Cf. S.K. George, *Gandhiji's Challenge to Christianity* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1947) cf. S. Radhakrishna's foreword in this work.

ments and gifts of the various races and peoples. Anything in their way of life that is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact. Sometimes, in fact, she admits such things into the liturgy itself, as long as they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit."⁵² Elsewhere is also stated: "By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, whose centre and summit is the most Holy Eucharist, missionary activity brings about the presence of Christ, the Author of Salvation. But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, this activity frees from all taint of evil... Whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples is not lost. More than that it is healed, ennobled and perfected."⁵³

It is heartening again to see that such a change is to be found not only in the official stand taken by the Church, but is also reflected in the minds of many individuals. We find a growing awareness among many an individual that they could have their Christian worship, true and valid, and yet remain in consonance with the culture of the Land. Just to quote one example of such an awareness: "There is perhaps nothing which would so transform our Christian prayer as the adoption of *bhajans* and *namajapa* adopted for Christian use, but using the traditional tunes accompanied by *tabel* and *cymbals*. Nothing conveys more impressively than this music."⁵⁴ But, for an Indian Christian it would be disheartening to find that despite the fact that such changes have taken place both in the mind of the church as well as among certain individuals, and many follow-up activities have been pursued in line with the official recommendations of the Church and, expert committees have been set up, and guidelines have been proposed towards the integration of the Christian worship with Indian culture, yet the liturgical reform effected so far in India has not been very commendable.

52. "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy", No. 37, Walter M. Abbott ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*. (America Press, 1966), p. 151.

53. Bede Griffiths, *Indian Spirituality in Action* (Bombay: Asian Trading Corporation, 1973), p. 12.

V

CONCLUSION

The contention of this article has been that, it is absolutely necessary for the Christian Church in India, to adapt the symbols of Indian Culture into her worship. The main ground on which my argument is based is the consideration of the functions of symbolization in worship, thereby showing that they cannot be fulfilled meaningfully unless the symbols are related to the general culture in which the worship is performed. When there is a conflict between the symbolism that is used in everyday life in accordance with the culture of the community and the symbolism that is used in worship, which is largely imported from other cultural traditions, there is a strong case for removing the conflict between the two. Now such a conflict can be removed only by a renewal of worship by absorbing the symbols of the culture into its worship.

Care must be taken to see that such a renewal of worship does not turn out to be a new ritualism, a mere change of rites, in which the signs are artificial and empty and which do not affect or alter the life of the worshipping community. After all, the essential functions of worship, let it not be forgotten, are i) purification of soul individually, and ii) Unification of the Community as a whole. Hence any attempt at the renewal of worship in a community must reflect the renewal of its life with respect to both the purity of the individuals and the unity of the community as a whole. A renewal of worship which does not bring out both these aspects is bound to be empty and artificial. Hence it is necessary that the renewal of the worship should express the renewal of the faith of the community, a faith which is alive, a faith which is creative, a faith which is relevant to the concrete existence of the community, being rooted in it.